

Various thinkers of the Frankfurt School have argued for the corrosive, or dissolvent effects of instrumental reason on Western thought and morality. What do they mean by this, and do you think any of them are right?

Lukas Kostal

Problems in Philosophy of Morality

Prof. Greg Artus

Imperial College London

20.4.2023

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, first published in 1944, Adorno and Horkheimer introduce the notion of instrumental reason and warn of its damaging effects on Western thought. The idea remains central to the philosophy of the Frankfurt School and is further refined and expanded by its successive thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas. This essay will aim to interpret the effects and show how instrumental reason has left us stuck in a way of thought in which means are themselves taken as an end, resulting in alienation from self, self-domination, and self-destruction of social systems.

The age of enlightenment has established reason as the main method of attaining knowledge, while rejecting superstition and belief which are still recognized but disregarded as merely the results of the limited human mind struggling to comprehend the greater picture. Due to our innate fear of the unknown we have soon started to utilize this reason as a means to ensure certainty and efficiency. Such an application of reason is coined the term instrumental reason, initially described as ‘a universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools, rigidly purpose-directed and as calamitous as the precisely calculated operations of material production, the results of which for human beings escape all calculation.’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002, p. 23). With this came the shift of focusing on the methodical nature of means rather than their ends. The perfection of means has itself become an end. Society now pays less attention to where it is heading but it is making sure to get there as efficiently and safely as possible.

The unknown in our existence emerges from the complexity of the natural world which lies beyond our comprehension. Establishment of certainty therefore requires society to gain control over the natural world, destroy the complexity, and impose structure. ‘the control of internal and external nature has been made the absolute purpose of life.’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002, p. 24) where the internal nature represents the nature of us as human beings and the external nature the nature of the environment in which we exist.

The control of our own internal nature results in self-domination in the form of suppression of personal desires and aspirations in favor of what we believe to be a greater good. ‘Domination of nature involves domination of man.’ (Horkheimer, 1947, p. 93). This leads to alienation of self since an individual has to reject all of his personal attributes reducing him merely to his ability to contribute to the means of the masses. ‘Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination. It is the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself.’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002, p. 95). This is precisely a form of heteronomy to the social structure. The individual is then left void of a personal identity which he can form only within the framework permitted by instrumental reason. This is commonly achieved by formulating an identity as a unique combination of otherwise ordinary commodities. In other words we succumb to materialism and mass culture.

Another adverse effect of instrumental reason and the accompanying idea of domination as a form of attaining certainty, is the prohibition of creative thinking within society. Creative thinking, as described by Kant, can be understood as a process giving rise to novel and worthwhile ideas. A novel idea must uncover a previously unknown aspect of nature. Therefore, if both the internal and external nature is dominated to the point of absolute predictability, there remains no sense of unknown left for creative interpretation. This offers us the sense of comfort in that we know we will not encounter a new idea but restricts us to a single limited way of understanding the world.

Application of instrumental reason to politics leads to formation of systems the sole purpose of which is to provide the means to gain power and control over a population. 'Domination survives as an end in itself, in the form of economic power. Pleasure itself shows traces of the outdated, the irrelevant' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002, p. 82), 'Domination becomes 'internalized' for domination's sake.' (Horkheimer, 1947, p. 93). Politics therefore strives to become self-preserving, and any change is discouraged as it is seen as destabilizing. The domination and manipulation of the masses are justified as a means of providing stability and an illusion of certainty and progress.

Individuals are recognized purely by their objective worth as a means to sustain the functioning of society. Under instrumental reason cooperation is therefore exploited as no more than a means, forgetting the natural human desire to cooperate and contribute based on our unique identity.

In morality, instrumental reason forbids any emotional perception which allows for complete codification of morality into a system of laws giving rise to the judicial system. All moral decisions are then made by applying rational reason to evaluate the ethical value of a choice resulting in rule utilitarianism. Ethical choices which achieve the greatest amount of happiness with greatest certainty and efficiency dominate. The ultimate goal of the judicial system is therefore to gain control over the masses and impose order.

Justice is surrendered to predictability and the fear of being wrong. It is deemed more efficient to impose a concrete set of rules which, while limiting personal freedom and in many specific cases leading to injustice, also offer the escape from having to make individual moral decisions and bearing the burden of their consequences. We become willing to act immorally under the idealization of sacrifice towards the greater good of society.

In this sense the critique of morality under instrumental reason of the Frankfurt School is similar to that of Sartre and the Existentialists for which morality has failed due to our paralyzing fear of accepting responsibility.

To summarize, instrumental reason has caused Western thought to accept banal ends by applying reason to the means by which ends are achieved rather than the ends themselves. This results in the fetishization of progress which has become an end in itself. 'Logic places itself in the service of progress and of reaction, and at all events of reality.' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002, p. 199). In pursuit of this progress we construct systems to control us and ensure the optimization of the means of our daily lives. For this the systems need to dominate our nature, which is slowly corroded away resulting in alienation of self. This is then all justified as the rational sacrifice to a greater good derived with instrumental reason. We are left enslaved by structure in our society and the pursuit of progress.

The successive critique of instrumental reason by Habermas still argues for the same adverse effects but also recognizes the importance of instrumental reason as it enables competitiveness and organization as a means to achieve a collectively established goal. Habermas also sets out to explore the interplay between our nature and instrumental reason.

To contrast the instrumental mode of applying reason, Habermas argues for a communicative reason which is reason founded in the natural human tendency to communicate and cooperate as both a means and an end in itself. 'When a group of humans wants to achieve something, they take action to reach agreement about the situation and on what as a group they intend to do. This process of reaching mutual understanding is what Habermas calls communicative action.' (Fairtlough, 1991, p. 548). We can therefore make the distinction between a lifeworld which is the natural world, based on communicative reason leading to cooperation of individuals, and social structures which are systems fabricated by us and which operate on instrumental reason resulting in the need to dominate and overpower.

While the principles of the two structures are in opposition, the social structures have been constructed by our natural means of cooperation. They therefore stem from the lifeworld and serve as its extension which accommodates the, to an extent desirable, competitiveness and organization between individuals. The lifeworld is the very thing which makes the social systems possible, and the social systems contain the behavior which would otherwise be damaging to the lifeworld.

Habermas then argues that with the rise of instrumental reason began the colonization of the lifeworld which is the attempt to impose the systematicity of the social structures onto the lifeworld. 'Cognitive-instrumental rationality surges beyond the bounds of the economy and state into other, communicatively structured areas of life and achieves dominance there at the expense of moral-political and aesthetic-practical rationality' (Habermas, 1985, p. 304). This infiltration by instrumental reason causes a systematic exploitation of the key aspects of the lifeworld. For example the development of culture industry in which the arts are seen only as a mere means of economic gain and control, for example in the form of propaganda. The identity of an individual is lost, and its search is commodified to a pursuit of lifestyle. Communication is abused as a tool for domination and control rather than the natural cooperation and exchange of views.

We must not forget that the social systems are founded on the cooperation nested in the lifeworld. Therefore, the colonization of the lifeworld and the domination of communication, which enables the necessary cooperation, results in an undermining of the social structure itself. 'The self-destruction of Western reason is seen to be grounded in an historical and fateful dialectic of the domination of external nature, internal nature, and society.' (Habermas, 1987, p. 218). In striving for self-preservation by means of control, the political systems and social structures have become inherently self-destructive as they erode the very process which enables their existence.

Ultimately, colonization of the lifeworld has therefore left us stuck in a self-dominating and self-destructive way of thought.

To conclude the thinkers of the Frankfurt School proclaim instrumental reason to have corrosive effects on Western thought and morality as it establishes domination and control as the means of sustaining the functioning of our society, replacing our natural ability to communicate and cooperate. This leads to alienation from self, rejection of individual responsibility resulting in loss of morality at a personal level, banishment of creative thinking and the rise of institutionalization, culture industry and fetishization of progress.

The proof of these critical claims can be found in their logical derivation, but this relies on the application of systematic reason, which is itself the subject of the critique. It is therefore best to put these claims in the context of our experience of life and the structure of society in which we are embedded. We can utilize our natural ability of communication to understand the opinions of others. The evidence of the damaging effects of instrumental reason therefore lies in our unanimous experience of the struggles which it inflicts of our human experience.

Bibliography

Adorno, T.W., Horkheimer, M. (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Vol. 15). Trans. Jephcott, E. Stanford, Stanford University Press.

Horkheimer, M. (1947) *Eclipse of Reason*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Habermas, J. (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Vol. 2). Trans. McCarthy, T. Boston, Beacon Press.

Fairtlough, G.H. (1991) Habermas's concept of "Lifeworld". *Systems Practice*, pp. 547-563

Niemi, J.I. (2005) Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative rationality: The foundational distinction between communicative and strategic action. *Social Theory and Practice*, pp. 512-532.